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SUBJECT: SLOVENIA: CENTER LEFT LEADER POSITIONS FOR VICTORY

Classified By: COM Thomas B. Robertson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Borut Pahor, leader of Slovenia's Social Democratic Party (SD) and member of the European Parliament, has embarked on a program to raise the profile and broaden the appeal of his party. COM hosted Pahor for lunch in late August to sound him out on his future plans and vision for Slovenia's political future. Pahor's short-term goal is to take over leadership of the center left from the Liberal Democracy Party (LDS), and in the medium term he believes SD could lead the government. Pahor also has personal ambitions (about which he is still a bit cagey) to run for President of Slovenia in 2008. Borut Pahor is by far Slovenia's most telegenic and polished politician. He has made several strategic moves over the course of the last 12 months, which should give his party a boost in upcoming local elections (October 22) and help build momentum for either a presidential bid in 2007 or a role in the government in 2008.

End Summary.

Slovenia On Top of The World

¶2. (U) A year ago, during the SD annual meeting, Pahor easily won the consent of the party to change its name from the United List of Social Democrats to simply Social Democrats. This put his party more clearly in the camp of the European social democratic tradition. In July 2006 at the Party Congress, the Social Democrats adopted a new, development-oriented, party program and titled it "Slovenia on Top of the World." In his lunch with COM, Pahor, assuming the posture of elder statesman (he is only 43), said he'd given the task to draft the new party credo to "young intellectuals" in his party. As heir to the Slovenian Communist Party, Pahor and the SD leadership had to walk a fine line in order not to alienate the party faithful. He appears to be mostly successful in striking a balance between social welfare and economic development which he terms (but hasn't completely defined) as "socially acceptable reforms." With this new program, Pahor wants to project himself and his party as strong leaders in opposition, and capable potential future leaders of government.

¶3. (U) In addition to putting Slovenia on top of the world, Pahor and SD have more concrete, near-term goals: success in local elections, continuing cooperation with the ruling coalition on Slovenia's Development Partnership, and preparing the SD platform for 2008 parliamentary elections.

Gaining Ground in Local Elections

14. (U) SD currently holds 19 mayoral seats including in Ljubljana, Maribor, and Nova Gorica, the proposed site of the potential HIT-Harrah's gaming/resort megadeal. Pahor stressed, however, that SD will measure success more by the number of seats his party gains on municipal councils. Pahor is hoping to reverse the declining trend SD has experienced in the last three sets of elections (in 2002 SD won only 11% of seats) by fielding candidates for council seats in 90% of Slovenia's municipalities.

15. (C) When COM queried Pahor on his hopes for the Ljubljana mayoral race where SD member Darija Smicic currently holds office, he shook his head and acknowledged she probably didn't have a chance, but they would support her nonetheless.

Cooperation in Interest of Common Good

16. (U) From the moment ballots were tallied in the 2004 elections which brought PM Janez Jansa and his Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) to power, there has been rumor and speculation that Pahor and SD would join the coalition. Until this point, however, the strong Communist roots of SD have been serious obstacles to realizing this potential. Pahor has sought other, more gradual, ways to move SD closer to the center (and power) that would be less offensive than outright membership in a coalition led by the center right. In the spirit of doing what is best for Slovenia, its economy and social safety net, Pahor joined the "Development Partnership" established by the ruling coalition in April 2006. The SD has been active and can even claim success. It lobbied strongly and vocally against introducing a flat tax in Slovenia, which ultimately succumbed to public and political pressure.

17. (C) Comment: This was a brilliant move on Pahor's part, as he is seen to be cooperating with the political right in Slovenia's best interests, but with this significant "win" retains his opposition bona fides. Pahor had also implied in an earlier interview that a minister (Finance) could "fall" if the idea of a flat tax did not "fall" first. Pahor was coy on this issue during lunch, but it is clear that he needs to continue to balance his cooperation with SDS with assertions of his party's differing views on other issues of importance.

Shedding Communist Associations

18. (U) In prepping his party for a serious run at Parliament in 2008, Pahor has recognized the need to make a clean break with SD's Communist past. This has not been, thus far, an easy sell. By pulling in the younger members of the party to draft the new platform, he is laying the groundwork for refashioning the SD into a modern, European, center-left, social democratic party. The author of the "Slovenia at the Top of the World" document, Igor Lukšic, a professor at Ljubljana's Faculty of Social Sciences, said in a press interview that SD needed to reach for the summit of Slovenian politics. He acknowledged it would be a difficult task because some party members did not embrace the new program. Lukšic called on "these 'comrades' to move aside and make room for those who believe and who have energy and will." Pahor also offended the SD old guard by saying to the press, that while he recognized the Communist party as part of the "tradition of the left," he and SD "reject the values and political strategies of the left that can nowadays be regarded as communist."

COMMENT: Mature Opposition, Ready for Greater Responsibility

19. (C) During lunch, Pahor was relaxed and relatively open about his ambitions both for the party and his own prospects. With LDS in disarray and decline since 2004, Pahor has

easily grabbed the stage to represent the left. He needs, now, to consolidate his position, and that clearly requires showing political maturity and shedding the negative connotations of SD's Communist past. Pahor credits his time in Brussels with his evolution as a more substantive and more European politician. Despite his cooperation on the Development Partnership, Pahor remains adamant that he has no designs on the current coalition. He did not say never; however, "not now" was the clear message. Pahor also expressed his personal interest in running for President in 2007, and leaving the party to the "younger generation" (Pahor is only 43). If SD does well in the October 22 elections, however, Pahor is sure his party will ask him to stay on in order to secure the best outcome in 2008. Pahor said he was amenable to that, but it was clear his first choice would be the presidency. Whichever way the next elections go, we should expect to see Borut Pahor at the top of Slovenian politics sooner rather than later.

ROBERTSON